

[Lore of the Lumberjacks]

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FOLKLORE

NEW YORK Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER May Swenson

ADDRESS 228 W. 22nd St. New York City

DATE October 11, 1938

SUBJECT LORE OF THE LUMBERJACKS

1. Date and time of interview October 5th and 6th, 1938
2. Place of interview His home
3. Name and address of informant John Rivers 656 W. 179th St. N. Y. C.
4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant.
5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you
6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

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NEW YORK

FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

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NAME OF WORKER May Swenson

ADDRESS 228 W. 22nd St. New York City

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SUBJECT LORE OF THE LUMBERJACKS

John Rivers was sitting on the stoop smoking his pipe. He had on a well-worn black overcoat, but no hat on his grisly close-cropped head.

-Pretty cool today in spite of the sun- I greeted him.

-Naw- he said. -I like it... I like a nip to the air.- A slyness crept into his smile, and he closed one eye. -Irreckon you've come to pester me for a story. Wal, come on in.- He took me to his room at the back of the flat.

-The wife ain't home- he stated after we were seated. -Good thing - he laughed. -She was askin' me who the young lady was that was here th' other day. I told her 'twas none a her biz. She got a little hopped about it. She's likely t' take a broomhandle to ye if she catches a young gal snoopin' in here.... Wal, y' know I'm just foolin...just a little joke, a little gag as y' might say- He laughed again.

-Will you think me too personal if I ask how you lost your finger?- I asked, thinking there might be a story behind the stub of a forefinger came against which his pipe rested.

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-Wal, the cross-saw got it, long ago... Yeh, the two-handled saw y' use at the base of a big tree cuttin' it down. Wal, 'bout forty years it's been I've been minus m' finger. I dont miss it no more. ...Naw, lumberjackin' ain't so dangerous for them as knows their job... I member one young feller though...

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a high-climber* he was... up a big un .. 400 foot or more... loppin' the top. Wal, it was a young tree.. plenty spring in it yet, an' when the top ripped off it throwed the guy right off, from the way it snapped back. A lower limb caught him by the chin where he fell, and his neck was broke before he hit the ground. His safety belt broke on 'im. But that sort a thing only happened very seldom...very seldom an accident or nothing. ...Y' know my wife laughs at me fer talkin' always like I'm doin' about ma lumberin' days...says I got a fix** on it. Wal, I guess there's a grain a truth there...Yup, them was the days I like to remember an' I liked that work...bein out doors all weathers an' all. It's a man's work alright...non' a yer white collars has got the stuff nowadays.... I been in lots a businesses. I been in rail-roading a while, an I worked in the mills***, an' I been in fruit produce.. trucking. Seen a good bit a the country in my younger days.. an I tell you thar wasn't no talk of depression then... not that times were better. They was tough. An' tougher than now. Yup. But nobody cried for better or sat down and waited for government relief. No sir. The young bucks them days was up an doin' an they made their own way. 'Thout college edications too. My pinion this college degree business does more harm than good. Makes 'em soft. Makes 'em all think they're college professors an' workin' with their hands not good enough for 'em. Listen..trouble with young people today is they think too much and do too little Yup. Y'otta postpone settin' and thinkin' till yer old like me. When there ain't nothin' better t' look forward to. Be up an' doin', young lady. That's my advice t' young people. Go ahead and get some place an' do yer thinkin' later.

.....Them days there was a frontier of industry, y' say? Yeh, that's an ol' argement. There ain't nothin' new t' explore, y' says eh? No room for new

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*High climber— A man who hops off the top of a tall tree before it is sawed down from below.

**fox: fixation

***mills—saw mills.

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enterprise, the frontier gone! Listen, don't let 'em kid ye, sister. There's always room t' spread out.... Hey, what about the frontiers of the sky? Naw, I don't mean Venus and Mrs.. an' we can't quite reach for the moon yet, neither... ha, ha. But lookit airyplanes. Don't yuh know there's a fronteer ain't hardly been touched. It's one of my ideas, that there Frontier of the Sky. Y' know it was machinery all along, by golly, made new industry. It was autymobiles, trains— first mail, than transportation, then development till soon everyday use of them new contraptions speeding employment an' progress. Transportation had a lot t' do with settling the country. An' now we got the airyplane an' the radio. The airyplane is just a gadget of luxury yet, but wait. Pretty soon for them as has get-up to 'em, airyplanes 'll be used for everything—all kinds of hauling an' commercial traffic an' for vehicles fer any person t' go places. Yes, sir, the sky'll be full a'em—an they'll have to have traffic lights up there. An' listen, when Europe comes to be no further away accordin' to time, Y' un'erstan, than say, Floridy or up North, Canady—why a little two-bit squirt won't stand a Chinaman's chance a takin things over. Cause airyplanes an' radios are gonna make the world one same state. An' a little squirt of a two-bit upstart with a smudge on his upper lip'll get slammed in the jug for meddlin' with what's too big fer him. An' listen, don't get me wrong. I ain't no Comminist. But I got my own ideas, y' un'erstan. An you put a mark on my word, the world ain't so big but what a few man with brains an' the gadgets they can think up with them brains, can't shrink it, till its small enough to handle uner one govermint system. Yup, air's the thing nowadays. Y' see men are getting their wings back—see? An' radio— air— see what I mean? Air—the new frontier!—

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After this impressive harangue, I ventured to ask Mr. Rivers, how a woman assuming she comes within his category of the “go-getting type”, ought to go about securing a place on the “new frontier of the sky.”

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-Listen- he leaned forward in his rocker, and removed his pipe, gesturing for emphasis. -Listen, I aint get nothin' against wimin, un'erstan. Wimin are a most necessary gadget in a man's life.- He winked broadly. But wimin are makin' a mistake floundrin' 'round like they do in a man's world. Wimin has forgotten her place. Listen, do you see a chicken struttin' around crowin' an' wearin' a comb? D'yuh see a good milk sow tryin' t' dry up her teets an' runnin' round bellerin', believin' she'll be goin' in the bull ring? Animals got more sense then humans some ways. Nope. By golly a woman should stay a woman an' not try t' mix in with men's doins. Now, you'd be a lot happier yerself, stayin' home cookin' for a good man than runnin' around the town gettin' stories for a newspaper or whatever it is yer gettin' 'em fer. A woman ought to fix on bein' a good wife an' mother, bein' sweet an' companionable to some husban', an' helpin' him in his work by not bein' too curious about it. Wimin got funny minds. They're made good fer arguin' but never fer settlin' anythin'. Lot's a wimin are smarter than men when it comes to thinkin' up high-flutin' things, but they ain't practicle. They ain't got good practicle hoss sence, an' so their minds are dangerous. The more a woman leaves her mind alone the better woman she makes, I always say. An above all it's unbecommin' to a woman to try t' be like a man. A whistlin' gal an' a crowin' hen Neither will come to no good end - they used t say. An' there's a lot a truth in that there.....-

While we were talking, I had heard steps moving about in the kitchen, and now Mrs. Rivers appeared in the doorway, arms akimbo over her apron.

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She is a short plump woman with very white hair, pulled back in a 'bun' on the nape of her neck. Looks to be about 65. Pale blue eyes, small features, false teeth with very red gums, which click as she talks.

Mr. Rivers wriggled in his chair, seeming slightly discomforted, and said:

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-Hello 'Gail.- (He had told me his wife's name was Abigail) -You just come in frum marketin'? This here young lady's same's was here th' other day is pesterin me for t' tell her a story about the lumber camp—but I ain't told her nothin' yet.-

-How do? - Mrs. Rivers nodded to me. And to her husband: -Wal, yer willin' enough to talk, I know that.-

Whyn't you tell her a story, 'Gail? Tell her how we went on our honeymoon.- He winked: - An' how y' made a wish our married life'd be nice an placid with no grief or accidents, an' then how yuh went an' tumbled over the bridge into the falls, an' I had to jump in an' save yuh. Tell her about our first night we spent in a tourist cabin— an there warn't no blinds on the windows—

Mrs. Rivers put an indignant damper to her husband's joshing by going over to him an emptying the ashtray in the grate, and calling his attention to the ashes he had spilt on the rug. Then she turned to me and said:

-John's a big one for talkin' Miss. An' the best you can do to not pay a mind to half of what he says, cause he'll talk a leg off yuh an' nothin but lies.... Supper's on- she informed her husband. -An' I want you to get through eatin' before Bert an' Margaret (their son and daughter-in-law come in.-

I arose to leave. As John Rives shuffled into the kitchen, he sniffed at the pea soup heating on the stove, and as he held the door for me, he remarked slyly behind his hand:

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-'Gail's a awful good cook anyway. Yup. See what I mean? A woman's place is in the home!-

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Thursday, I made an appointment by phone with Mr. Viers, hoping this time to get some lumberjack lore from him. I asked him to tell me “how cold it was that year in the lumber camp in Wisconsin.” The following tale and the one about Happy Jack and his Derby, according to Mr. Viers, are samples of the tall tales swapped by the lumberjacks during long winter months while confined to their bunkhouse, waiting for the thaw to set in, so that the logs could go down the river.

“Happy Jack” and “Noggin”, characters in these stories, were the names of lumberjacks in the outfit. And the custom seems to have been for the man telling the story to use as his here (usually derisively) one of his buddies in the camp.

Wal, I'll tell yuh—by golly it was so cold that time, I 'member that— wal, y'see this was right after a big snowfall lasting three weeks. Everyday snow, snow, snow—till we was up to th' gables in snow. Right up to the roof of th' bunkhouse. Then it began t' freeze. An' 'fore long we was 'eased in a solid wall of ice. Only air we had was from th' chimbley which was kept open by th' smoke from th' fire. The' heat of the smoke kep' th' chimbley clear.

Wal, th' cold spell it seemed like it'd never let up. An' every night we'd cut cards for a man t' stay over the fire when the' rest turned in, to watch th' fire, not let it go out. An' one night Noggin, that was one of th' fellers, he got the low card and stayed with th' fire.

Wal, I guess ol' Noggin got sleepy what with th' Applejack he'd put away an' all. An' he took him a nap. An' meanwhile th' fire died, an' next thing we was in a fix. Th' chimbley

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plugfull of icicles, so tough an' so thick that there wasn't no draft come down enough to light a match and make even a stick burn.

Wal, there we was due to suffocate an' freeze at th' same time. No heat, no air, an' it gettin' colder by th' minute. So what to do? Warn't but one thing—dig ourselves out. So th' bunch of us we got out our cross saws an' some 7 band saws we had an' we got out picks an' one thing another, an' opened up th' door (lucky it opened in, cause a solid wall of ice hit right smack up against th' bunkhouse on all sides) An' we commenced to saw ourselves a tunnel through that ice.

Now, th' bunkhouse was set in a sort of gully-like, with th' front facing a hill, see? Only to the back th' ground was flat for quite some space to th' other side of the gully. An' we figgered dig out toward th' hill an' first thing you know, diggin up-slope that way, you'd hit the surface, seein' the snow, before it froze solid, had drifted down into th' gully. An' most likely left th' top a the hill at least shallow enough so when you got that far you'd be above the drift.

Now un'erstan we couldn't hardly see our way, th' ice bein' so deep an' thick it shut out all but a little bit a daylight. An' bein 'way above our heads—four times as tall as a man, at least—we couldn't see above us just where we was goin'.

Wal, it must a been near onto a week we dug along that tunnel expectin' t' reach th' top where th' hill sloped enough. Course th' bigger an' longer th' tunnel got, th' more air we had, but whew! how cold it was.' Ef it hadn't been for that Applejack whiskey—(we had a-plenty a jugs of it on hand, an we took a-plenty with us)—I doubt of a one of us would a come out a that ordeal alive. But as it was we had away t' keep us warm inside anyhow.

Wal, by golly, as I was sayin', we sawed an' dug and sawed an' dug for it musta been a week or more. An' it looked like we'd never make it to th' top. An' the ice seemin' t' get

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denser an' the light comin' through fainter. But we went on sawin' an' diggin' our tunnel for 'nother week or two, every day expectin' to hit the top.

Wal, now Noggin—he was th' feller let the fire die out— we penalised him, see? We made him stay at th' cabin and never told him where th' 8 Applejack was hid. It was in th' bottom th' wood barrel all th' time— And by not lettin' him go long with us an' cuttin' down on his liquor, we figured that was a fit punishment for a feller who'd lay down on watch an' maybe 'danger th' lives of his pals that way like he done.

So, wal, like I said, we was diggin' an' diggin' an' sawin' an' sawin', an' with very discouragin' results. An' I tell yuh it was so cold that our hands froze to th' sawhandles an' when we laid down now an' then, usually on Sundays, t' get a little shuteye, we'd have to sleep with our saw arm 'tached up to the handles where th' saws were stuck in the ice.

Now we never knew if it was hardly night or day an' so a-course we had to make our own system of keepin' track of th' days passin'. So we had a timekeeper who did nothin' but stand an' count th' saw strokes of one feller, an, we figgered roughly five billion, four million, eight thousand, six hundred an' ninety-nine sawstrokes made about twenty-four hours. (Them boys we had up there in th' 'Consin hills could saw fast alright.) An so we counted th' days that way. An' Sunday, like I said, we set apart for sleep, figgerin' one sleep a week ought to be a-plenty for tough, hardy fellers like us jacks, 'specially in an emergency.

Wal, wakin' up an' startin' work Monday morning was sure a problem, 'count we'd have to pick th' icicles offen our beards an' out-a our eyelashes, an' sometimes hold a lighted match in our mouths so as to thaw a hole down our throats for th' Applejack to run down.

Y'know, a good whiskey is a godsend in cold weather. Yup, this here Applejack—I reckon you wonder why it didn't freeze too, bein a liquid. Wal, y'know why in winter they put

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alcoholol in car radiators—? Yup, that Applejack was good stuff by golly—about [11%?] percent!

So we went on a diggin'. Now, course all the ice we dug away, it had t' go someplace, didn't it? It had to take up space some place. An' so th' only 9 thing we could do was keep pushin' it behind us, makin' th' tunnel, an' by an' by all th' space in back of us was filled up, so we was standin' in a sort of room-like, an' diggin'. An' this way, not seein' either back'ards or for'ards, we had very little notion where we was headin', 'cept we kep' a-headin' as close as we could figger for th' side a that hill.

Golly, that was an awful long cold spell that year. 'Cordin' to our figgerin', when we'd been diggin' fer two month an' eight days, it was time for th' thaw to set in, but nope, it kep' as cold as ever.

It was so cold that pipe smokin' got to be a menace. How was that-? Why, you'd light up an' you'd puff an' you'd happen t' blow a ring or two—au' what happened? It was so cold that th' smoke rings would freeze solid, like doughnuts, an' drop down on yuh. One feller nearly got his eye put out from havin' a frozen smoke ring drop back into his face.

Wal, anyhow, we just kep(on diggin'—an' t' make th' story short, I'll take you t' th' end right now.

Yup, one day we hit th' end a our trail at last. It was three months an' 24 days to be exact when we quit diggin'. Know why? We finally hit right up against th' bunkhouse door! Yup. Right where we started from—right at th' front door. Naturally, just like children lost in th' wood, we traveled 'round in a perfec' circle. We'd swung way out to th' left, away from th' hill, made a wide circle over flat land an' fetched up back where we started from.

Wal, some of th' boys was for bein' discouraged. But right away I figgered that things was gonna be alright. Cause through th' crack th' door I seen firelight. Yup, we clomped in, an there we seen how Noggin was all humped up cozy afore th' fire, which was blazin'

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away pretty as yuh please, an' him cuddlin' a jug of Applejack like it was a baby, an' a big contented grin on his face.

An' when we come in froze stiff, our saws an' picks hangin' off our 10 hands froze solid, why ol' Noggin he commenced t' laugh. An' he laughed till he was tied in knots.

-I been here soft an' warm a gettin myself liquored up nice,- he says. -While you fellers been traipsin' off to hell an' gone through th' cold. Ef that's punishin' - he says, - punish me some more. I like it.-

Wal, we axed him how he got th' fire started, an' after while he up an' told how he poked around an' poked aroun' till he found where th' Applejack was hid—an' when he found it bottom th' woodbox, it was a cinch to pour a little on the fire an' with that firewater wettin' th' wood, th' touch of a match sent th' flames roarin' up an' thawed out that chimbley in no time.

Wal, we settled down to wait for th' thaw, an' it wasn't long afore all that ice loosened an' slid down th' gully to th' river. An' soon after that we had th' logs rollin' again.

But Noggin never got tire ribbin' us about how we was for punishin' him, an' the Applejack startin' th' fire an' all.... Yup, by golly, yuh gotta admit there ain't nothin' like good ol' 112 percent in cold weather....!